DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 937 CS 010 489

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TITLE Teacher Perceptions and Practices for Using Children's Literature in Elementary Reading Instruction.
PUB DATE 28 Nov 90
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (40th, Miami, FL, November 27-December 1, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Educational Research; Elementary Education; Questionnaires; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; Reading Material Selection; Reading Programs; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Methods; Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

This study investigated three questions regarding: (1) teachers' views about the role of children's literature in the reading program; (2) how teachers implement literature-based reading programs in their classrooms; and (3) the congruence between teacher perceptions and teacher practice regarding literature-based reading instruction. Subjects, 192 teachers, completed two-part questionnaires designed to assess teacher perceptions of and identify classroom practices in literature-based reading instruction. Results indicated that the teachers who participated in the study agreed widely on certain beliefs and practices: that teachers should develop their own literature programs; that children's literature should be the major component of elementary reading programs; that children should be taught to think critically about books; and that these children should independently read books of their own choosing every day. Second, teachers disagreed considerably on other practices and beliefs, including the importance of reading many books versus studying one books in-depth; the importance of recommended grade level reading lists; how children should be grouped for instruction; and how to assess children's learning in literature-based reading. Results indicated a congruence between teacher perceptions and teacher practice regarding literature-based reading instruction. Results also indicated that certain other variables were related to teachers' beliefs and practices, including teaching location and teacher experience. (Twenty-three references are attached.) (MG)

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# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES FOR USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ELEMENTARY READING INSTRUCTION

Paper presented at the 40th Annual Meeting
National Reading Conference

Miami, Florida

November 28, 1990

The authors wish to acknowledge William Balser and Dr. John Skowronski for assistance with data analysis.

CS010457

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# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES FOR USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ELEMENTARY READING INSTRUCTION

In recent years, there is growing interest nationwide among elementary teachers for using children's literature as the core of the reading program. A national survey (Cullinan, 1989) indicated that many states are involved in literature-based initiatives, and some states, led by California, have mandated the use of literature (Alexander, 1987). Therefore, many teachers are making the transition from highly structured commercial reading programs to literature programs that require extensive teacher decision-making regarding materials, grouping, instructional practices, and assessment. Concerns are now being raised in the profession about the nature and appropriateness of the implementation of some literature-based programs (Gardner, 1988; Purves, 1990).

Despite the sweeping nature of these changes, little systematic research has documented classroom practice in or teacher perceptions about literature-based reading programs (Lehman, 1989; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). There have been several studies of the effectiveness of literature-based reading instruction (Cohen, 1968; Chomsky, 1972; and Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986). Additionally, there are a number of first-hand accounts by teachers who have implemented literature-based reading programs (Hancock & Hill, 1987; Nelms, 1988; Routman, 1988). Finally, Scharer's (1990) research documented the

transition of teachers into literature-based reading programs, and research by Hoffman, Roser, Battle, Farest, and Isaacs (1990) probed teacher learning and change from using children's literature in primary classrooms. Still, there is a need to provide more in-depth examination of the nature of literature-based reading instruction (Hiebert & Colt, 1989; Zarrillo, 1989).

In addition, there is a growing body of research into the relationship between teacher beliefs or perceptions and instructional decisions in reading. In 1977, Duffy (quoted in Meloth, Book, Putnam, & Sivan, 1989) studied the relationship between teachers' concepts of reading and their practices and found that these were congruent for just half of the participating teachers. Later, Buike and Duffy's (1979) research into this same relationship found it to be positive, at least at a superficial level. However, a closer look showed the relationship to be "fluid" (p. 9) and influenced by other non-reading conceptions (such as classroom management) and by grade level and pupil ability level. Meanwhile, DeFord (1979) validated an instrument to determine teachers' theoretical orientation in reading instruction. This instrument was used by Richards, Gipe and Thompson (1987) to investigate teachers' beliefs about good reading instruction. They found that two of the theoretical orientations, the graphophonics and the whole language stances, were correlated strongly with different kinds of experiences, such as years of teaching experience, number of professional reading courses taken, and number of different grade

levels taught. These findings tend to support Rupley and Logan's (1985) discovery that teachers' knowledge of reading content relates to their beliefs about reading, which, in turn, influence their decisions about the importance of reading outcomes, namely decoding-oriented versus comprehension-oriented outcomes. Finally, both Shapiro and Kilbey (1990) and Meloth, Book, Putnam and Sivan (1989) argue that critically and reflectively examining teaching practices is essential for teachers to integrate their theoretical knowledge and beliefs with their instructional behavior.

Thus, the purposes of this study are to investigate three questions: (1) What are teachers' views about the role of children's literature in the reading program? (2) How do teachers implement literature-based reading programs in their classrooms? (3) What is the congruence between teacher perceptions and teacher practice regarding literature-based reading instruction? This article will report initial findings of our research in progress and will describe the next steps that currently are underway.

## METHOD

To initiate our research project, we developed a two-part questionnaire that would assess teacher perceptions of and identify classroom practices in literature-based reading instruction. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers for specific use in this study. The teacher perception component

of the questionnaire was modeled after the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (DeFord, 1979), while the second component was patterned after an instrument to survey practices in writing instruction (Freeman, 1989). The questionnaire was pilot-tested and modified (with the help of an outside consultant) based upon the preliminary results.

The revised questionnaire then was given to 350 elementary teachers who attended a local conference that dealt with literature-based reading. One hundred ninety two teachers returned the questionnaire for a response rate of 55%. The respondents represented teachers in grades K-7, as well as reading teachers. While almost all of the respondents taught in public schools, 15 taught in private or parochial schools. School locations were characterized by 31% of the teachers as rural, 19% as suburban, 37% as small city, 7% as urban, and 6% are unknown. Teaching experience of respondents ranged from 0-4 years (20%) to 5-10 years (18%), 11-15 years (18%), and more than 15 years (41%); 3% gave no response.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were analyzed using several procedures: percentages of responses for each item, analysis of variance, and canonical discriminant analysis. The results will be discussed as they relate to the three research questions.

Teachers' Views About the Role of Children's Literature

Teachers indicated consistent beliefs in several areas: 73% strongly agreed or agreed that teachers should develop their own literature programs rather than relying on published programs; 94% agreed or strongly agreed that children's literature should be the primary component of the reading/language arts program; and 92% agreed or strongly agreed that children should be taught how to use critical thinking skills when they read books.

Other beliefs produced varied responses. Much difference of opinion existed concerning whether it is more important for children to read widely or to engage in an in-depth study of one book. The beliefs of experienced teachers differed significantly from those with less experience, $F$ (3, 184) = 2.95, $p$ <.034, in stressing the importance of reading widely. The importance of a suggested list of children's books for each grade level also produced significant differences in responses. Teachers in rural and small city districts felt lists were significantly more important than those teachers in suburban and urban locations, $F$ (3, 168) = 3.14, $p$ <.027. Teachers in suburban and urban schools felt more confident than their counterparts in rural and small city districts in teaching literature without the benefit of a published program, $F$ (3, 167) = 6.38, $p$ <.000. There were wide differences of opinion regarding whether certain books should be read by every child and whether children should learn how to analyze books by their literary elements. Finally, rural and small city teachers were more in agreement than suburban and

urban teachers that children's literature should be studied using a structured, sequential curriculum, $F$ (3, 171) = 4.45, $p$ <.005.

Teachers' Implementation of Literature-based Reading

Ninety-one percent of the teachers report that their students have very positive or moderately positive attitudes toward reading, and 85% read aloud at least once a day. Children read books of their own choice on a daily basis in 78% of the classrooms, in 13% it is done three times each week, in 7% at least once a week, and in 1.6% it does not occur on a regular basis. Basals are used to varying extents in 54.5% of the classrooms while 45.5% of the teachers do not use the basal at all. Responses to the question regarding how children are grouped for instruction varied considerably as follows: 11.7% group by reading ability, 11.7% by student interest, 0.6% by social interaction skills, 51.1% use flexible grouping, and 25% do not use any kind of grouping. Teachers use a variety of materials including teacher-made and commercially-prepared worksheets, multiple copies of books, other media and a classroom library. More than 60% of the teachers feel that student enjoyment is the most important reason to use literature. The two most important criteria in selecting books for classroom use are children's interest and literary quality, while the least important criteria are school district mandates and the skills the books can be used to teach.

How do teachers assess literature-based reading? Projects/

extension activities, conferences, and observation are used most frequently, while book reports, worksheets, and written tests are employed least frequently. Reading logs/journals also are used by a majority of teachers. Nine percent of the teachers report that they do not assess literature work. Observation as a method of assessment was used significantly more often by kindergarten and first grade teachers than by middle school teachers, $F$ (3, 118) = 7.02, $p$ <.000. Further, more experienced teachers use observation significantly more often than less experienced ones, $F$ (3, 148) = 4.06, $p$ <.008. However, less experienced teachers use projects significantly more often than experienced ones, $F$ (3, 149) = 4.54, $p$ <.005.

Congruence Between Beliefs and Practice

A canonical discriminant analysis was computed to determine the congruence between teacher beliefs and practices. This procedure indicates the relationships between criterion and predictor sets of variables. The technique provided insight regarding whether beliefs predicted which practice was used and which of the beliefs might be most related to the use of a particular practice.

The respondents' beliefs were used as predictors for each of the 12 practices. The canonical discriminant analyses indicated that the measured beliefs could predict the use of six of the practices. The results revealed that teachers' perceptions significantly predicted: a) how much time students read a book of

their choice in class; b) the role of the basal reader in the classroom; c) the primary resource used by teachers in planning the literature program (such as, teacher-made guides, published teacher's guides, or commercial literature programs); d) how book extensions are selected (whether by teacher or student choice); e) the types of materials used in instruction (such as, teacher-developed or commercially prepared materials, children's books and other media, and the basal reader); and f) whether conferences are used as an assessment technique. It does appear, then, that teacher beliefs do correlate with certain classroom practices as reported by these teachers.

## CONCLUSIONS

While this report concerns phase one of an on-going investigation, there are several conclusions that can be reached at this time. First, the teachers who participated in this study widely agree on certain beliefs and practices: that teachers should develop their own literature programs, that children's literature should be the major component of elementary reading programs, that children should be taught to think critically about books, that these teachers read aloud to their students daily, and that their children independently read books of their own choosing every day.

Second, teachers disagreed considerably on other practices and beliefs: on the importance of reading many books versus studying one book in-depth, on the importance of recommended

grade level reading lists, about their own confidence level for teaching literature, about the role of basals in a literature-based program, about how children are grouped for instruction, and about how to assess children's learning in literature-based reading.

Third, we found that there is congruence between teacher perceptions and teacher practice regarding literature-based reading instruction. Specifically, beliefs predict practice in six areas: two issues related to teacher- versus child-centered instruction (time for children to read books they choose and who selects the book extensions children do); three items related to materials used for planning and instruction in literature-based classrooms (whether teacher-developed or commercially prepared and the role of basal readers); and one practice related to using conferences in assessment.

Finally, we discovered (as did Buike and Duffy [1979] and Richards, Gipe and Thompson [1987] cited earlier) that certain other teacher variables relate to their beliefs and practices. In particular, teaching location correlated with teachers' perceptions of the need for structure. Suburban and urban teachers felt more confident than rural and small city teachers about developing their own literature programs without the benefit of book lists, published programs, or tightly sequenced curricula. Also, more experienced teachers believed more strongly in the importance of children reading widely, and they were more apt to use observation as an assessment tool. On the

other hand, less experienced teachers were more inclined to evaluate literature work through projects, and teachers of older children used observation in assessment less often.

## NEXT STEPS

As planned from the beginning of this project, information from this survey has been used to select teachers to participate in follow-up interviews and classroom observations to obtain additional information that may clarify, refine, and substantiate the questionnaire results. A stratified random sample of ten teachers (from 54 volunteers) has been identified for these interviews and observations. In particular, several areas on the questionnaire seem to warrant more careful scrutiny during the interview: teachers' knowledge and understanding about children's literature and reading, how they make instructional decisions, and how they assess children's growth. At the same time, classroom observations and collected artifacts of children's literature work will provide an opportunity for the researchers to validate the teachers' self-reports of practices and their congruence with teachers' stated beliefs.

In the end, it is hoped that implications from the investigation can be generated for the preservice and inservice literacy education of elementary teachers. The trend toward literature-based reading is laudatory, we believe, but the implementation of such programs should be scrutinized carefully, for interpretations of what "literature-based" instruction means

vary widely. Our research suggests that teachers' perceptions do influence their practices, and thus perhaps more self-awareness about their beliefs will benefit their practice. As advocated by Meloth, Book, Putnam, and Sivan (1989), "teacher education programs should emphasize the value of reflection about one's teaching so that preservice and inservice teachers can better integrate what they know about subject matter [in this case, teaching with literature] and about effective means of enhancing their instruction of that content" (p. 38).

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